

ARTS AND LETTERS

Woman of Steel

At 96, the American-born, Italy-based sculptor Beverly Pepper has spent six decades bending metal to her will and rewriting the rules of modern art.



By Megan O'Grady

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IT'S EARLY ONE APRIL morning in [Todi, Italy](#), and the installation is already underway: the four sculptures in pieces on a flatbed truck in the deserted piazza; the dawn sky lit a dramatic ombré, like a [Giorgio de Chirico](#) painting. Within the hour, the town begins to wake: flocks of schoolchildren, men and women oblivious to the russet-colored steel monoliths — each around 33 feet high and weighing about eight tons — slowly rising in their midst. The artist arrives, observing the scene from a small white car tucked in a corner of the piazza. “I get goose pimples,” she says. “It’s been 40 years.”

It’s hard to imagine now, but in 1979, when the American sculptor and environmental artist [Beverly Pepper](#) first created the [columns](#) for this ancient [Umbrian](#) hill town, their presence was controversial. Monumental contemporary sculpture was novel here then, and Todi’s modest square, which dates at least to the 11th century, is itself a sacred space: The evening I arrived, I was met by the face of Christ, his blurry visage projected on the duomo for the town festival. But traditionalists’ attitudes have changed, in large part because of the Brooklyn-born artist herself, who has made her home in Italy since the 1950s and has been an honorary citizen of Todi for a decade. Those Tuderti (as people from Todi are known) old enough to remember the columns’ first appearance speak with reverence for the woman who bends metal like paper, who makes chunks of steel transcendent; their return, they say, feels like a necessary correction. Pepper recalls how, in those days before 3-D digital-mapping software, she walked the piazza to understand its proportions. The morning after the columns were installed, following a night of rain, she arrived alone. “I was overwhelmed by what I’d done,” she says.

Today, she watches quietly, fretting (unnecessarily) about the safety of her assistants, who, with the help of the crane operator, are stacking the columns in place, the pieces suspended in the sky, descending millimeter by millimeter. The mayor comes over to congratulate her, followed by friends and other passers-by: “Bellissimi, signora, grazie.” Pepper smiles. “I’d forgotten how good they are,” she says of the columns, finally, after the hubbub subsides.

The irony is that, for all their modern poise, once installed, the four “Todi Columns” might always have been there: relics not from the 1970s but the Iron Age, the kind of archaeological remnants that make you aware of your own minuteness in the larger human project. The effect is similar in nearby Assisi, where “[Ascensione](#)” (2008), a massive bisected curve of Cor-Ten steel stretching upward — a kind of skateboard ramp to the heavens — seems perfectly in place a stone’s throw from the [Basilica of St. Francis](#). Public art can sometimes feel ponderously corporate or impersonal, but the unroofed splendor of Pepper’s site-specific works can prompt unexpectedly potent encounters. Wandering through Todi’s emptied piazza during the dinner hour, the silence has a certain volume; I feel freshly aware of my feet on the planet under the demarcated sky, the passing clouds overhead, the exclamation marks of the columns’ shadows underfoot. They don’t dominate but punctuate. They are framing devices for wonderment.



Image: Pepper’s new “Todi Columns,” which were installed this year at the Piazza del Popolo in Todi, Italy. Credit Photograph by George Tatge; courtesy of Beverly Pepper Studio

Time, that fourth dimension, has always been an essential element in Pepper’s work — a desire to create something outside history, something bigger and more enduring than herself, than all of us. Its passage is evident in the cycle of seasons in her earthworks — a transformative winter in “[Palingenesis](#)” (1993-94), a 227-foot-long cast-iron relief embedded to a retaining wall in a Zurich hillside, or with “[Thel](#)” (1975-77) on the [Dartmouth](#) campus in New Hampshire, where cantilevered pyramids disappear entirely when it snows and reappear when it melts for students to lounge upon. Its fingerprints are unmistakable in the moody patina of her cast-iron pieces, like Federal Plaza’s “[Manhattan Sentinels](#)” (1993-96), or the velvety finish of her iconic Cor-Ten works, which she’s been making since the late 1970s. In 1964, Pepper was among the first sculptors to use the industrial alloy, which oxidizes and stabilizes without the use of paint or sealant. If the weather doesn’t cooperate with enough rain to rust a sculpture before it is unveiled, she jokes that her assistants will just have to pee on it.

AT 96, PEPPER is in deep time. Her children, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet [Jorie Graham](#) and the photographer John R. Pepper, have grown children of their own. She recently became a great-grandmother. Pepper's monumental sculptures and land art, the products of an extraordinary six-decade-long career, can be found on three continents; she's been awarded countless commissions and prizes. And yet her legacy is still unsettled. If Pepper's story illuminates how a place can stake its claim on an artist's psyche and soul, the geographic remove from New York's art world that gave her space to innovate also kept her from the sort of fame enjoyed by other monumental sculptors of her caliber, like [Sol LeWitt](#) or [Richard Serra](#), both of whom she admires. Pepper simply didn't play the game. This did not, however, keep her from finding early representation by such important New York City galleries as [André Emmerich](#) and [Marlborough](#), as well as acclaim from prominent critics.

Then there's the fact that Pepper's eclectic, allusively titled body of work tells a complicated story, one that imprecisely adhered to the rigid tenets of Minimalism, with its anti-referent stance and self-justifying manifestoes. In retrospect, one can't help but feel her instincts were right all along; even her oldest pieces feel *sui generis*, not pinned to a single point in art historical time. (Her touchstones are at least as European as they are American; she especially loves [Brancusi](#) and [Piero della Francesca](#)). "I don't like to get caught in any kind of mental trap when I'm working," she says. "I feel and see. Things fall from my mind to my hands." Pepper never serializes; she's avoided cultivating a sole trademark style, preferring to explore a range of materials and processes intuitively, with an almost Zen-like attention to the "divine accident," as she calls it, the chance encounter. If a cricket lands on her sketch pad (she's constantly sketching), she'll simply include the insect in her drawing rather than brush it to the ground. Later, something of the architecture of its body may appear, transfigured, in a sculpture. One of the many divine accidents of her career occurred when she discovered glacial erratics — immense angular rock slabs — on a collector's property in California and incorporated them into her "San Anselmo Monolith" (2007-10). "You have to listen to the materials," she tells me. "Bronze is very controlled; metal — anything you can bend to your will — you have to figure out how to make warmth come to it. Each material has its own kind of aliveness." Pepper's animism doesn't feel mistily numinous but rather born of a fascination with the geometric building blocks of the natural world.

There is, of course, another reason she's remained on the art world's periphery: Misogyny takes a bow. In the opening paragraph of [a virulent New York Times review](#) of her 1987 [Brooklyn Museum retrospective](#), John Russell wrote, "Rome is a charismatic place, and by all accounts Ms. Pepper is a charismatic person," before blasting the show — at the time, among the largest ever devoted to a living sculptor by a major New York museum — as "one of the most debilitating, hyped-up and deeply offensive exhibitions of the postwar era." (Reading this, Pepper took to her bed for two weeks.) It's that old story, the unsung brilliance of a woman who is somehow threatening to someone. Industrial fabrication and [land art](#) have always had a macho cast, and in fact, there weren't a lot of women sculptors of her generation in the factory bending sheets of metal with welders or casting ductile iron alongside engineers accustomed to building balustrades and bridges. (Other trailblazing 20th-century giants of sculpture such as [Louise Bourgeois](#), Barbara Hepworth and Louise Nevelson made their work in foundries.) Pepper also failed to fit the narrative of second-wave feminism: As an abstract artist, she wasn't embraced by the burgeoning women's movement of the 1960s and '70s, and she's yet to have had her moment of rediscovery. The expectation runs strong now, as it did then, that creative women make art of their faces and psyches. But Pepper has always resisted such categorical labels as "woman artist"; in Italian, she insists on being referred to not as *scultrice* but *scultore*.



Image: Among the objects in her studio are plaster castings from a more whimsical creation — not art — of Pepper's for Christmas with the family one year. Credit Federico Ciamei

This has been Pepper's year, beginning with a [retrospective](#) of smaller-scale early work at Los Angeles's Kayne Griffin Corcoran: arched steel ribbons like three-dimensional brush strokes; polished stainless steel boxes that reflect their surroundings enigmatically. In February, a [second show](#) of recent monumental sculptures made of Cor-Ten steel opened at Marlborough's downtown New York gallery — a return to the curve after many years of sentinels, wedges and obelisks. At the [Venice Biennale](#) in May, [she showed](#) more of those colossal torques and twists. This month, the Beverly Pepper Sculpture Park opened in Todi, featuring 16 works donated by the artist in a landscape of her

design. (The 2019 “Todi Columns” have made their permanent home here.) She’s also just completed construction of her latest “amphisculpture” — classically inspired outdoor performance spaces she’s built in [New Jersey](#), New York’s [Westchester County](#) and [Pistoia, Italy](#). [This one](#), in L’Aquila, seats a thousand people and is the artist’s gift to the Abruzzan city still rebuilding after the [2009 earthquake](#). It has already become a popular public gathering place for concerts, its smooth, curving rose-and-white granite shell rising out of a valley just down the hill from the glorious [Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio](#), built more than 700 years ago of the same local stone.

This sensitivity — to history, ecology and the community — defines Pepper’s earthworks in contrast to land art’s associations with earth-gouging excavations in far-flung desert locales. Even in her most ambitious projects there’s a lack of bombast. They range from the very urban — Barcelona’s spectacular 115,200-square-foot “[Sol I Ombra Park](#)” (1987-92), featuring a cresting mound of earth covered in ceramic tiles in shimmering *azulejo* blues — to the pastoral: “[Hawk Hill Calgary Sentinels](#)” (2008-10), which includes pyramids constructed on soil excavated from a wetland restoration project outside the Canadian city. Pepper’s ongoing conversation between the natural world and what we build on it calls our attention to our experience of the land rather than her mark upon it. “I can hear it,” she says of the earth. “Can’t you?”

A FEW DAYS before the installation, I visit Pepper at the verdant rolling hills surrounding Torre Gentile, the village in Todi that has been her home since the early 1970s, when she and her husband, [Curtis Bill Pepper](#), the journalist and author, bought and renovated the castle at the top of a cypress-lined road. At the time, no Americans lived here, but so many of the Peppers’ visitors ended up acquiring property in the area — including the New Yorker writer Jane Kramer and the Abstract Expressionist [Al Held](#) — that it’s become known as Beverly Hills. Several years ago, before Bill died in 2014, the couple built a one-story home surrounding Pepper’s studio, and this is where I find her, perfecting models for her latest sculptures, including two taut, tapering curves sweeping dramatically upward. “A little bit thinner here,” she tells one of her assistants. “It looks like a fat woman.”

Following a bad fall three years ago, Pepper uses a wheelchair, and while she no longer makes her own full-scale models in plaster, her process still moves from sketches to maquettes in poster board, which she often fabricates at that size before going bigger. Everything she creates must look *imprevedibile*, or “unpredictable,” with an “incredible tension,” she says, “otherwise, it’s boring.” It’s sometimes hard for her to know when to stop: Even her iconic “Todi Columns” weren’t spared a makeover. When the price of transporting the originals from Venice turned out to be prohibitive, she remade them instead, taking the opportunity to finesse their proportions: “The neck was too stumpy.”

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The wine comes out at lunch — an informal affair served at the kitchen table involving ravioli and greens from Pepper’s garden — and so do the stories, from her memories of Alice B. Toklas — “She came to lunch and it was rather disconcerting because she had a pronounced mustache,” recalls Pepper, “but Bill liked to flirt with all the gay ladies” — to the time [Betty Friedan](#) cornered her at an event — “She looked like a truck driver, that’s the nicest thing I can say, and she said, ‘Well, are you with us or are we not together?’ I said, ‘None of you invited me in!’”

Italy has been Pepper’s home for nearly seven decades, but her voice and screwball humor are all Brooklyn. She was born Beverly Stoll in 1922; her father sold rugs and furs. The only art in their house off Flatbush Avenue was a painting of a ship on velvet. The Depression cast a shadow, but two women made Pepper believe she could do anything: her mother, Beatrice, an activist for the NAACP who

made space for Pepper in the basement to paint, and her paternal grandmother, Rose, who fled Vilnius as a teenage Menshevik prone to speechmaking against the czar. (In 2005, Pepper completed an earthwork in Rose's honor, "[Walls of Memory, For My Grandmother](#)," for which she gathered branches from a nearby forest and embedded them in concrete.) "There's a while, a lifetime, when you're young and you don't realize you're a woman," Pepper explains.

It didn't last. At 6, after she bought a box of colored pencils from the neighborhood store with a dollar pilfered from her mother's pocketbook, her father beat her so viciously she couldn't attend school for a week. "I left home in my mind then," she says. At Pratt Institute, where an invitation to join a sorority was rescinded after it was discovered that she was Jewish, she was barred from pursuing industrial design, which involved unfeminine things like saws and welders.

Her mother's fear that she would become a "starving artist" led Pepper to graphic design and commercial art, and by 24, she was a successful, if restless, art director at a Manhattan advertising agency. Inspired by a young illustrator in her office (named, fatefully, Jorie), she got on a boat to Europe, enrolling at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where she studied with the Cubist painter [André Lhote](#) and [Fernand Léger](#), a champion of outdoor public art. "It was an amazing experience because I felt like Eve — I had just discovered that I was naked," she says of her arrival in Paris.

Image



Beverly Pepper's "Activated Presence," made in 2000 from Carrara marble. Credit Courtesy of Beverly Pepper Studio



Image: Pepper's "Prisms," made in 1968 from stainless steel. Credit Courtesy of Beverly Pepper Studio

Pepper was painting then, mostly social realism, as she absorbed the scenes of poverty and suffering she saw in postwar Europe. She was alone in Rome when she met Bill, an art history enthusiast and former Army Air Force intelligence, at what was then an artists' hangout, the bar at the legendary Hotel d'Inghilterra. (Decades later, when her daughter checked into the hotel, asking that they give her a good room while she was on a book tour, the elderly *portier* told her, "Signora Jorie, I'll give you the room you were conceived in.")

Pepper and Bill married in Paris and eventually settled in Rome, where the artist had her first show, of paintings she'd made in Paris, at Galleria dello Zodiaco. (By all accounts, the connective tissue in the couple's 65-year marriage was a deep respect for each other's work — one verbally gifted and analytical, the other creative and intuitive, both ravenous in their desire to know more, to see more.) After Bill became Newsweek's Mediterranean bureau chief, he would bring home the [Cinecittà](#) actors he was profiling for lunch and entertain everyone with inside stories from the Vatican. Rome's dolce vita period tends to be misremembered as a glitteringly hedonistic time, but they were also very lean years: "You know what the dolce vita was about? Cheap help," Pepper says dryly. In her memory, it was a period when creative people banded together to reimagine the world; [Michelangelo Antonioni](#) and [Federico Fellini](#) were simply her friends.

Pepper's daughter was irked by the flow of guests. "Sometimes it would make me crazy," Graham recalls. "I would think, 'We have no money. Why are we having so many people come and eat all our food and drink and enjoy themselves when we are going to be struggling?'" Later, I understood: They had to feel alive, they had to feel not alone." A sensualist, Pepper at times supported the family by writing cookbooks; the first, in 1952, "[The Glamour Magazine After Five Cookbook](#)," includes a recipe for mock turtle soup. A more gastronomically appealing follow-up, "[See Rome and Eat](#)" (1960) is a testament to how quickly she was permeated by Italian culture. "It's very difficult to move into another world and not have a judgmental aspect of it and accept that there is another way to do things," says the artist, who has never thought of herself as an expatriate. "And it's a rock and a hard place. I had good, good luck being able to arrive at the exact right time in France, and then Italy, and then you know, it was a roller coaster. But what a great roller coaster."



A workbench littered with tools in the Todi studio. Pepper began sculpting in her late 30s, after a trip to Angkor Wat. Credit Federico Ciamei

This enterprising, improvisational mode extended to her art practice. In the 1950s, Pepper painted mostly at home, often using her young daughter as a model. Memories of Pepper and her exacting gaze recur in Graham's poetry, from the young woman holding a basket of lemons calling out to her child in "[Cagnes-sur-Mer 1950](#)," her voice seizing "the small triangle of my soul," to the elderly artist holding mortality at bay with her charcoal and paper in "[Mother's Hands Drawing Me](#)." If Pepper "wasn't the kind of mother who did bedtime rituals," as Graham puts it, her work ethic was thrilling (and influential). The two remain close and speak daily by phone. "If I had to choose between a force of nature and a warm, fuzzy presence, I've been accustomed to love the force of nature, and to get my nurturing from there. But I ended up with a force of nature as a daughter," she says. Graham recalls how her mother, dressed for an evening out, would return to her basement studio while she waited for her father, burning holes into her long white leather gloves. Sometimes she enlisted her daughter's help with the soldering. "I would just hold whatever it was and close my eyes, and I was terrified of the little sparks that strike you," Graham remembers. The artist and the poet have collaborated once: When Pepper designed the "[Sacramento Stele](#)" (1998), four 18-foot-high monoliths surrounded by redwood trees outside the California Environmental Protection Agency building, she asked Graham, a vocal environmentalist, to contribute. The result, "Also Blooming," has never been published and exists only in the words incised into the pietra serena stone.

AS SHE TELLS it, Pepper became a sculptor during a seven-month trip through America and Asia in 1960 with her 10-year-old daughter. She was 37, and she needed a fresh perspective. In Japan, mother and daughter dove with pearl divers; in Varanasi, India, they waded the Ganges amid the ashes from the funeral pyres. But what especially gripped Pepper's imagination was the mid-12th-century Khmer temple complex at [Angkor Wat](#) in Cambodia, engulfed at that time by the elephantine roots of banyan trees. For 10 days, Pepper returned to the site to sketch the trees grappling in a kind of death match with the ancient carved heads and doorways — sculpture not simply as object but total environment, in concert with time and nature. When Pepper returned home to find that a grove of elm trees had been felled near her home in Rome's Monte Mario, she bought them all and carved them into writhing biomorphic oblongs.

Two years later, Pepper was among a handful of sculptors chosen, along with [Alexander Calder](#) and [David Smith](#), to participate in the [Festival of the Two Worlds](#)' exhibition "[Sculpture Nella Città](#)" in [Spoleto](#), for which the selected artists fabricated new work in Italian steel factories. There was one problem — Pepper didn't know how to weld. No matter: She approached a local blacksmith and learned from him. In the factory in Piombino, she worked three shifts a day alongside industrial laborers, who called her Bev. On many subsequent factory floors — smelly, hot, dirty — Pepper found her artistic being: She discovered the potential of Cor-Ten at U.S. Steel in New Jersey in the 1960s; she experimented with ductile iron at John Deere in Moline, Ill., in the late 1970s, where she made her iconic "[Moline Markers Ritual](#)" (1981), 13 delicately textured totems, a chess set for deities.

Another lesson from the factory floor: the ability to speak, with directness and humor, across social barriers. This is a skill that she would rely on in public commissions, which, in those predigital days, involved flying in — dressed, as always, in jeans and cowboy boots — and making a presentation in front of a board. "Beverly is like a flexible stone," says Dale Lanzzone, who has worked with Pepper over the past three decades on more than a dozen major site-specific works, public and private, currently on behalf of Marlborough. "She has the appetite to remake the world."

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Sixty years after her fateful trip to Angkor Wat, Pepper can no longer lift heavy tools or walk the terrain of her earthworks, yet that appetite to create and the scope of her vision remain undiminished. So what propels an artist in winter to go on, largely unrecognized, through the decades? As she approaches her centennial, Pepper is undeniably still making some of the greatest work of her career. How, and why, does this woman of steel do it?

But perhaps these are simply the wrong questions to be asking of an artist who has always had to find ways to realize her grand projects without wealth or fame. Perhaps defying the insurmountable obstacles she faced as a woman to create her body of work is its own triumph. As in monumental sculpture itself, perspective is everything: the faultiness of what we call art history, with its false dream of meritocracy, reflects the limitations of the people who create it; it is, after all, not carved in stone but a living chronicle to be reinterpreted, blasphemized, blown up and rewritten.

PEPPER'S EXISTENCE — of an artist of her generation and achievement, who happens also to be a woman — speaks to a simple truth. This is a story not of “dogged determination” but of how the force of her talent might be powerful enough to explode our own assumptions about an era — even many years after that era has, at least in art historical terms, passed. When the artist wakes in the night and reaches for her sketch pad and box of pencils, the 6-year-old trading her security for the potential of her imagination seems close at hand, as does the apprentice to art and beauty arriving in Europe at its apocalypse. Time bends, in such moments, like a sheet of molten metal.

The creative impulse, for Pepper, has become a form of faith. Currently, she's prototyping the development of an island created in Venice's harbor to regulate the flow of seawater to the sinking city, a design that includes a public amphitheater with a channel of water coursing through it, culminating in a beacon rising high into the air — a reference to lighthouses of the past for a future that feels once again uncertain. The festivities in Todi have ended, and Pepper needs to get back to her studio. “There's so much to be done,” she says. Time only moves forward.